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ABSTRACT

Few things have affected American education as much as the changing face of its student population. American education has been slow to implement multicultural education, and when it has been implemented, it has taken on numerous forms. Multicultural education takes so many different forms because no clear definition exists. Some educators are reluctant to implement a multicultural curricula because they do not recognize its importance. Incorporating multicultural studies into an already overburdened curriculum requires rethinking the entire curriculum and its implementation rather than merely adding on to what already exists. Parents also need support and instruction if they are to be active participants in the school environment. While textbooks are often important determinants of what students are expected to learn, they will always be limited. Several researchers point out the problems with implementing multicultural education. Some teachers fear the use of multicultural literature because some parents want their children to read only about their people, while others attack books about minorities as racist. Research on multicultural education is flooding educational literature, reflecting the issue's importance. The changing population requires an examination of the current curriculum. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Karen Gersten

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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Multicultural Education

Few things have affected modern American education as much as the changing face of its student population. An increasing number of students in American classrooms were born in other countries, and these students bring to school their rich cultural backgrounds. American education has responded to this cultural diversity with multicultural education. Yet like so many other educational concepts, multicultural education is complex, multidimensional, and controversial. Before American education can be truly multicultural, educators and the public must agree on a definition of multicultural education, believe it to be important, and understand how it will affect traditional American education.

American education has been slow to implement multicultural education, and when it has been implemented, it has taken on numerous forms. "Some teachers view it only as the inclusion of content about ethnic groups into the curriculum; others view it as an effort to reduce prejudice; still others view it as a celebration of ethnic holidays and events" (Banks, 1993, p. 25). Multicultural education takes so many different forms because no clear definition exists. Even the experts in the field of multicultural education offer diverse definitions. Janzen (1994) identifies two diametrically opposed and competing views of multicultural education: **Cultural pluralism**, the goal of which is to maintain ethnic groups and their idiosyncratic ways, while the goal of **assimilationism** is to absorb all groups into mainstream America. Janzen sees these two opposing views as the cause of the confusion about multicultural education. Banks (1993) identifies the following five dimensions of multicultural education: Content integration; the knowledge construction process; prejudice reduction; an equity pedagogy; and empowering school and social structures (p. 25). Howard (1993) suggests that part of the work of multicultural education is the attempt to reach a peaceful transition to a new kind of America in which no ethnic or cultural group is in a dominant position. Kellogg's (1988) definition requires multicultural education to teach students to respect and understand diversity, while Norton (1990) sees more content-specific uses of multicultural education in helping students expand their understanding of geography and natural history, historical and sociological change, their literary appreciation, and their reading, writing, and thinking

skills. With the experts offering such a range of definitions, it is no wonder the classroom teacher is unclear about just what his or her multicultural classroom should be.

Some educators are reluctant to implement a multicultural curricula because they do not recognize its importance. Recent trends in immigration are one reason to broaden the curriculum. According to Kellogg (1988), the children of recent immigrants are less prepared for school than were immigrant children of past generations (p. 203). In addition, these children come primarily from Asian, Hispanic, and Caribbean countries, and they bring with them a wide range of backgrounds, languages, and cultures. First (1988) sees "an increasingly diverse student population [that] confronts an increasingly rigid school environment" (p. 208). Currently 2.6 million children are classified as limited-English proficient, and more than 6.3 million children speak a language other than English at home (McKeon, 1994). According to Banks (1993), about 45.5% of the nation's school-age children will be people of color by 2020. A traditional curriculum cannot possibly meet the needs of so many diverse children.

The changing student population is not, however, the only reason to change existing curricula. The economy is another. Textbook companies will face a multicultural marketplace, and America is dealing in an increasingly global economy. A successful American economy depends on culturally aware Americans. A multicultural curriculum is one step toward a culturally literate society.

Once educators agree on the need for multicultural education and on its definition, their real work begins. How do schools incorporate multicultural studies into an already overburdened curriculum? The answer seems to be to rethink the entire curriculum and its implementation rather than merely to add on to what already exists. Banks (Brandt, 1994) explains the need to transform the curriculum so children view reality differently. But even Banks is sympathetic to any attempt to incorporate multicultural information. "I think it's OK to start with Black History Month, as long as you don't stop there...You can't transform the curriculum overnight" (p. 28). Ideally, though, Banks advocates examining topics in the current curriculum from different points of view and changing teaching strategies so students from culturally

diverse backgrounds will learn more effectively. It is not necessary to abandon current studies; it is only necessary to study them differently.

Numerous educators have conducted and examined research to help achieve Banks' goals. Ladson-Billings' (1994) examination determined five areas important to educating a multicultural population. Those areas are teachers' beliefs about students, curriculum content and materials, instructional approaches, educational settings, and teacher education. She cited Winfield's (1986) findings that teachers generally expect more from caucasian students than from minority students and from middle-class than from lower class students. Such lower expectations lower achievement. She also found that a sincere commitment to multicultural education requires more than superficial celebrations of heroes and holidays; rather, it requires a regular curriculum that includes "a range of cultural perspectives" (p. 23). She advocates honoring the students' prior learning to move the students from where they are to where the teacher would like them to be and equalizing the quality of the schools where all American children learn. Finally, Ladson-Billings (1994) stresses the importance of ongoing teacher education. Teachers cannot change their teaching practices without instruction and support.

Parents also need support and instruction if they are to be active participants in the school environment. American-born parents may need help understanding the multicultural curriculum. Culturally diverse parents may need even more support and encouragement. Finders and Lewis (1994) conclude that "barriers...hinder some parents from participating in their child's education" (p. 50). They quote several parents who say they feel inadequate in school settings. This inadequacy can stem from language barriers as well as from cultural differences. For example, asking a child to translate for his/her parent during a conference is an acceptable American practice; in Latino cultures, however, it breaks a cultural norm. Getting culturally diverse parents to participate in their children's schooling requires education for both the classroom teacher and parents.

Students' education has traditionally come from textbooks. Garcia (1993) has studied research on textbooks to determine the acceptance of multicultural education in American-schools and to determine whether multicultural textbooks make a difference. He discovered that diverse groups receive more attention in today's textbooks than they have in the past but that such coverage is superficial. Overall, Garcia concludes that "textbook authors do not attempt to suggest the interconnectedness of the world's societies. Thus readers are provided with a limited view of multiculturalism" (p. 34). Garcia raises two important questions concerning the role of textbooks in multicultural education. First, he questions a body of research that has addressed the content of textbooks rather than their purpose. He suggests the need for research on how teachers use textbooks in the classroom. Further, Garcia questions what textbooks would look like if they were written by minorities. He suggests, again, a complex situation where each minority would argue among itself about what its history would look like. Garcia's conclusion is that, while textbooks are often important determinants of what students are expected to learn, they will always be limiting. Even if all textbooks were multicultural, they would never cure education's problems.

Finally, several researchers point out the problems with implementing multicultural education. Howard (1993) considers the changing role of caucasian Americans with the emergence of multicultural education. He cites recent increases in racist acts as the American population diversifies. He notes reasons for the white reluctance to change, and he suggests ways to move past this hesitation. He suggests the need for honesty, humility, respect, and action because, ultimately, the issue of cultural diversity is "a human problem, a struggle we are all in together"(p. 40).

Other researchers (Sacco, 1993; Smagorinsky, 1991) discuss censorship as a major deterrent to multicultural education. According to these researchers, teachers fear the use of multicultural literature because some parents want their children to read only about their people, while others attack books about minorities as racist. Further, when a teacher selects certain multicultural literature to study, she omits others. Therefore, the teacher is in effect censoring students' conceptions of other cultures. Smagorinsky (1991) raises the following questions about developing a multicultural curriculum:

1. In striving for multicultural inclusion, which groups should teachers single out for their students to study?
2. Should teachers consider the potential offensiveness of a work?
3. Should teachers consider the moral, social, and political values in a text?
4. Should teachers strive for a balance between positive and negative images of various groups?
5. Should the teacher choose texts that students often misunderstand because of complex literary techniques?
6. Can teachers teach any problematic text so that it can be a valuable experience for any student? (pp. 216-217)

Although the author believes society needs to share the experiences of various minority groups, Smagorinsky feels that sharing multicultural literature in a fair and equitable way is impossible. He suggests that the best solution is to attempt to present literature that represents all people as complex and balanced. Smagorinsky's warning is clear: Educators may be so focused on developing a fair and equitable curriculum that they may lose sight of the secondary dangers and inequalities they themselves may be creating.

Research on multicultural education is flooding educational literature. The amount of research is a reflection of the issue's importance. The changing population requires an examination of the current curriculum. If the existing curriculum cannot meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, it needs changing. Just how that curriculum will or should change is not yet clear. What is clear is that failure to change will meet the needs of fewer and fewer American students. So change is necessary because failure to change guarantees failure for students, for schools, and for society.

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